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ABSTRACT

This 2002 fall issue examines the "U.S. News & World Report" rankings of undergraduate colleges and universities and looks briefly at some of the assessment efforts that may give institutions, as well as students and their families, an alternative way to gauge institutional quality. The purpose is to help chief executives and trustees better understand how the rankings work so that they can agree on how the institution should consider its placement and conduct its business. "U.S. News" considers seven broad areas, each further stratified, in its rankings. It assigns roughly 1,400 colleges and universities to 1 of 4 categories based on Carnegie Classification. Weightings and the results of a survey of academic administrators go into the magazine's final ranking. The rankings are open to many criticisms that center on validity and the arbitrary nature of ratings. Emerging ways of evaluating institutions, including assessing benchmarks of effective educational practice, are discussed. Higher education executives and trustees should look long and hard at whether competing in the rankings game makes sense financially and in other ways. They should understand who uses the rankings and whether the institution is actually competing for these students. Rankings plainly do interest consumers, but the "U.S. News" rankings may not be all that interests those considering where to attend college. The report suggests 19 sources for further information. (SLD)

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The Uses and Abuses of the *U.S. News* Rankings

Daniel J. Levin

Priorities
Number 20, Fall 2002

Association of Governing Boards

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Number 20, Fall 2002

AGB Priorities

A membership service of the Association of Governing Boards to help trustees and chief executives identify and address strategic policy issues.

The Uses and Abuses of the *U.S. News* Rankings

BY DANIEL J. LEVIN

WITHOUT A DOUBT, elected officials and the public are paying close attention to how well colleges and universities are educating students. People are interested in educational results and accountability. State legislators, accreditors, parents, employers, and others want to know what students are learning and what they can do. Unfortunately, no one has come up with a broadly acceptable way to measure and compare achievement, either among students in different higher education institutions or among institutions that have outwardly similar missions but discrete and unique characteristics.

More important than the rankings is how to assess quality and results in higher education.

What are students and their families to do when it comes time to think about college? In hopes of finding some answers, millions buy the mid-September issue of *U.S. News & World Report* that ranks colleges and universities. Hundreds of thousands of anxious applicants purchase the more comprehensive guidebook, issued shortly thereafter, while others click away on the magazine's Web site. Media outlets race to be first to report the new rankings. And higher education officials breathe a sigh of relief, gnash their teeth, or remain stoically unconcerned.

For many trustees, alumni, parents, and others, a high ranking means bragging rights on the golf course or grocery line—an ephemeral pleasure similar to when the football or basketball team wins a national ranking. Clearly, however, higher education officials are frustrated by the magazine's supposed influence on the public and on the actual behavior of their institutions, even as many of them tout their own institution's results when they receive a high ranking.

Academe's frustration with the *U.S. News* rankings, however, has given greater momentum to an academic-assessment movement that has percolated largely out of the public eye. This issue

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Academe's frustration with the U.S. News *rankings has given greater momentum to an academic-assessment movement that has percolated largely out of the public eye.*

of *Priorities* examines the *U.S. News* rankings of undergraduate colleges and universities and looks briefly at some of the assessment efforts that may give institutions, as well as students and their families, an alternative way to gauge institutional quality. Its purpose is to help chief executives and trustees better understand how the rankings really work so they can agree on how the institution should consider its placement and conduct its business.

No doubt many senior campus officials are alert to articles in the popular press and research in academic circles that show the effects of the rankings. These accounts show, for example, that some institutions have changed admissions policies, and others have manipulated how they report SAT scores or other data. Further, changes in the magazine's methodology from year to year have caused institutions to rise or fall in the rankings, affecting application rates and the lives of many admissions directors and enrollment managers.

How the Rankings are Conducted.

U.S. News considers seven broad areas in its rankings. They are Academic Reputation, Student Retention, Faculty Resources, Student Selectivity, Financial Resources, Graduation Rate Performance, and Alumni Giving Rate. It assigns roughly 1,400 colleges and universities to one of four categories based on Carnegie Classification. The Carnegie Classification system was updated in 2000 for the first time in six years, and this led *U.S. News* to reclassify some 200 institutions for the 2002 rankings edition, which was published in September 2001.

This also led the magazine to change the names of the four categories: "National Universities" became "National Universities—Doctoral"; "National Liberal Arts Colleges" became "Liberal Arts Colleges—Bachelor's"; "Regional Universities" became "Universities—Master's"; and "Regional Liberal Arts Colleges" became "Comprehensive Colleges—Bachelor's." The rankings methodology itself did not change last year or this, but changes from one year to the next have caused some schools to rise or fall in the rankings even though nothing about the education they provide students really has changed.

The magazine tabulates data submitted by each institution as well as those it collects itself and ranks the top 50 institutions in each category. It then publishes the names of the remaining institutions in three "tiers" of about 50 for each category, although any institution can find out from the magazine just where it stands relative to its peers in all aspects of the rankings.

The chart on page 3 shows the weights for the various indicators used for the respective categories of institutions. Take note: The three most significant factors—Academic Reputation, Graduation and Retention Rates, and Faculty Resources—account for 65 percent to 70 percent of an institution's total score. Depending on the category in which they appear, some institutions are judged to a slightly greater extent on how well they graduate students relative to expectations; others are assessed more closely on how well they retain students.

Each of the seven major criteria is further stratified into subcategories, each with its own weight. For example, Retention is measured by using the average freshman retention rate (20 percent of the Retention value) and the average six-year graduation rate (80 percent of the Retention value). Similarly, the Faculty Resources area is measured by the following elements:

- the number of classes smaller than 20 students and larger than 50 students (30 percent and 10 percent of this measure, respectively);
- the average faculty salary and benefits for the two most recent fiscal years, adjusted for

Illustrations by William L. Brown

How *U.S. News* Ranks Institutions

Ranking Category	National Universities-Doctoral and Liberal Arts Colleges-Bachelor's Category Weight	Universities-Master's and Comprehensive Colleges-Bachelor's Category Weight	Subfactor of Category	National Universities-Doctoral and Liberal Arts Colleges-Bachelor's Subfactor	Universities-Master's and Comprehensive Colleges-Bachelor's Subfactor
Academic reputation	25%	25%	Academic reputation survey	100%	100%
Student selectivity	15%	15%	Acceptance rate	15%	15%
			Yield	10%	10%
			High school class standing—top 10%	35%	0%
			High school class standing—top 25%	0%	35%
			SAT/ACT scores	40%	40%
Faculty resources	20%	20%	Faculty compensation	35%	35%
			Percent faculty with top terminal degree	15%	15%
			Percent full-time faculty	5%	5%
			Student-faculty ratio	5%	5%
			Class size, 1-19 students	30%	30%
			Class size, 50+ students	10%	10%
Graduation and retention rate	20%	25%	Average graduation rate	80%	80%
			Average freshman-retention rate	20%	20%
Financial resources	10%	10%	Average educational expenditures per student	100%	100%
Alumni giving	5%	5%	Average alumni-giving rate	100%	100%
Graduation-rate performance	5%	0%	Graduation-rate performance	100%	0%
Total	**100%**	**100%**			

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regional differences in the cost of living (35 percent);

- the proportion of faculty with the top degree in their field (15 percent);
- the student-faculty ratio (5 percent); and
- the proportion of full-time equivalent faculty (also 5 percent).

As the foregoing vividly illustrates, the *U.S. News* criteria and formula are extremely complex. Many in higher education believe the assigned percentages are arbitrary and thus flawed, but *U.S. News* editors defend them based on their own research and the advice of some college and university officials.

The formula was not always quite so elaborate. In earlier iterations, the rankings relied far more heavily on the reputations of the schools, as perceived by top officials of the institutions the magazine polled. This "beauty contest"—a survey that now encompasses 4,000 presidents, provosts, and admissions directors who are asked to rate peer institutions on several measures—has attracted fervid attacks over the years on the grounds that it is unscientific, subjective, and misleading.

Timothy J. Sullivan, president of the College of William and Mary in Virginia, says the reputational survey is clearly meant to gauge the undergraduate program, but he believes respondents evaluate the institution as a whole. Sullivan says he doesn't know three-quarters of the institutions he is asked to rank. "Even for those I do 'know,' I wouldn't invest a lot in my opinion," he says. Another president says he ranked Williams College No.1 twelve years in a row, but he doesn't know a single faculty member or anything about its curriculum.

Robert Morse, director of data research for *U.S. News*, says respondents are instructed not to rank institutions with which they are unfamiliar, and schools are not downgraded when a respondent offers no grade for that institution. Further, he says outlier responses are culled from the tabulations, so a respondent's purposeful downgrading of a peer institution likely would be eliminated.

Anne McGrath, the managing editor of the magazine rankings and companion guidebook called *America's Best Colleges*, says of the reputational survey: "While down the road it may become possible to measure the quality of teaching on campus and the actual learning that's happening, meantime it's our hope and belief that the academic-reputation survey is the place where top administrators have the opportunity to factor those things in. We're really not asking them to tell us what is the reputation of their peers. That's the term we have used in the past on our tables, but what we really are asking them is to weigh the quality of the undergraduate educational experience specifically on this campus. In this year's rankings, out in mid-September, we will call the indicator a 'peer assessment' rather than an 'academic reputation' score."

Critics say the reputational survey is open to manipulation, though Morse says no one has been able to prove to him that an institution has moved up in the rankings as a result of efforts aimed at influencing peer responses to the reputational survey. Predictably, consultants say influencing peer responses is the most likely way to advance in the rankings, and that often is the basis of the service they sell to institutions that hope to do so. Many schools are spending large amounts of money on such efforts, and boards should question whether these are funds well spent. Sullivan says he regularly receives such marketing materials, but in any given year "only about ten or twelve ever reach my desk."

Despite the persistent criticism of the reputational portion of the rankings, the overall process and methodology of the *U.S. News* rankings have evolved for the better (see the sidebar on page 11). "They went out to the institutional research people and explained what they wanted," says Lewis Wyman, Barnard College's vice president for planning and research, who is responsible for filling out the magazine's 25-page questionnaire.

To solidify its credibility and disarm critics, *U.S. News* also established an unpaid advisory committee composed of institutional researchers and admissions directors from the mainstream of higher education. It meets annually in Washington, D.C., and at the annual conference of the Association for Institutional Research. The committee's chair, Robert S. Lay, dean of enrollment at Boston College, says his group collects concerns and suggests methodological changes to *U.S. News* editors. He says the editors have been open to advice and counsel, "which buys them goodwill with us." Regarding the perceptions of his peers in academe, Lay says, "We're pretty aware of how we're perceived, but we're acting in good faith."

Questions Trustees Can Ask

In 1995, AGB published an issue of *Priorities* by James P. Honan, a Harvard University lecturer, titled "Monitoring Institutional Performance" (available through AGB Publications). It contained much good advice regarding the rankings and listed key questions for boards and chief executives. Among them:

- Do we understand why our institution is ranked the way it is?
- What difference does it make if we rise or fall in the rankings?
- Is moving up in the rankings a worthy strategic goal?
- What would our institution need to do in terms of generating or reallocating resources to improve its ranking?

Honan also detailed various approaches to measuring institutional performance, citing methods developed in such AGB publications as *Understanding Financial Statements* and *Strategic Indicators in Higher Education* (the latter is now out of print), and urged boards to encourage internal development of indicators based on campus needs, capabilities, and goals that could be used to gauge quality and performance.

As a result of continuous efforts to improve the process, data gathering over the years has become more systematic and reliable. The magazine uses some statistics with definitions that institutional researchers have agreed upon and others that are federally audited; outlier responses and variances within one institution from one year to the next are routinely checked.

Yet criticism of the rankings remains constant. To give all this a better context, here's a short guide to some of the complaints that have fueled the controversy over the years.

The Rap on the Rankings.

Some of the controversy surrounding the rankings plays out in regular private conversations between college presidents and *U.S. News* editors at the magazine's offices in Washington, D.C. Some of the controversy finds a public outlet in the pages of such publications as the *Wall Street Journal* and *Washington Monthly*, the two periodicals that have developed the critiques that have most influenced contemporary press coverage and public opinion. Periodically, a college or university chief executive will attack the rankings in the op-ed page of a local or national newspaper. Occasionally, the major news organizations will use the account to stoke the debate. Invariably, this dance plays out in the weeks before *U.S. News* releases its updated list. The rankings are news in August and September and at no other time.

Very few people within higher education profess to love the *U.S. News* rankings, but if you ask around, you'll find many who blame the rankings for a host of ills and unintended consequences. Here is a summary:

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Case Study

Virginia Commonwealth University: A Higher Ranking Is in the Plan

A case of the tail wagging the dog, or a savvy strategic choice aimed at improving important measures of institutional performance? At Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, officials have set in motion a plan that explicitly states the school's top priority is to move from a Tier 3 institution to Tier 2 in the *U.S. News* rankings.

"*U.S. News* has won the battle," says longtime VCU President Eugene P. Trani with a trace of resignation. "In a time of increasing demands for accountability, the rankings are one measure the public can look at."

It's not that Trani endorses all the measures of quality, the data-collection and analysis processes, or the idea that ranking schools is plausible or desirable. But he may be one of a handful of chief executives who believe if-you-can't-beat-'em, join-'em—and convinced his board to do the same. "We have 15 or 16 graduate programs that are ranked among the best in the country, but at the undergraduate level we have a very inclusive freshman class. We're never going to exclude the historic VCU student" in the school's efforts to improve its ranking, says Trani. These students often are the first in their families to attend college, take on large debts to finance their education, and are 40 percent nonwhite.

But VCU clearly is taking on the notion that demographics and geography dictate destiny, and its top officials and trustees believe the *U.S. News* indicators are legitimate measures of quality—or at the very least are useful and appropriate in measuring VCU's success. Back in 1999, as part of a strategic-planning process, VCU officials scanned the *U.S. News* rankings to see where peer institutions and other institutions that officials admired were ranked. They soon established the goal of moving from Tier 3 to Tier 2 and developed a plan to make it happen. The institutional research office spent six months gathering data that U.S. News used in its ranking criteria, soliciting input from three councils composed of deans, faculty, staff, and other campus constituents. The school also hired a vice president for institutional outreach who was put in charge of the admissions, marketing, and communications portfolios.

In May 2000, Trani and his team made a presentation to the board. "Board members were

1. Schools cheat in the way they report data. Ever since the *Wall Street Journal* published two accounts in 1995 that documented how some institutions had fudged the figures they reported to *U.S. News*, conventional wisdom has been that many schools cheat. The *WSJ* investigation discovered colleges had inflated admissions data, test scores, and graduation rates in search of higher rankings at the same time they had provided accurate data (as required by law) to debt-rating agencies.

The conventional wisdom on cheating persists: In a survey of campus chief executives AGB conducted last summer (see page 14), one-third said they thought most institutions did not provide accurate information to the magazine, and 40 percent said they weren't sure whether most schools did so. Seven percent said they purposely downgraded a peer competitor in the reputational survey.

How do schools cheat? Some schools count incomplete applications as ones they rejected. Some have tried to attract applications from students they know they won't admit, so they can show increased selectivity. Others admit students with low SAT scores for the January semester instead of for September, so these lower scores won't figure into the averages they report. Some count postcard or Web-site inquiries as applications. Others fudge data for which there's no "official" source, such as the percentage of class size over 50 students or less than 20. All of this is hearsay and impossible to prove, but the perception is out there that some schools are cheating. Obviously, the competitive environment of higher education feeds this.

unfamiliar with the criteria, so we took time to explain them, using comparative data that illustrated what the rankings mean," says Provost Roderick McDavis. "They began to understand that it was possible to move some of our numbers, and they made some specific suggestions regarding fund-raising and lobbying." The board also asked for a five-year plan, and by February 2001 VCU officials delivered "Becoming a Tier 2 National University: The Future of Virginia Commonwealth University." When all is said and done, says McDavis, the plan may cost up to $400,000 to implement.

The document is filled with goals and strategies specifically linked to the *U.S. News* rankings criteria. For example, noting that the school's "academic reputation" accounts for 25 percent of its ranking, the plan sets its sights on boosting the rating from 2.8 to 3.2. Nine strategies follow, ranging from improving academic programs to developing a national marketing plan to enhancing publications and the Web site. With the "faculty resources" criteria accounting for 20 percent of an institution's score, the plan calls for increasing the proportion of full-time faculty with terminal degrees in their fields from 83 percent to 88 percent and for increasing the proportion of full-time faculty from 82 percent to 90 percent. Three strategies follow.

"At every meeting now, board members are asking how we're doing on the plan," says McDavis. "It tends to make all administrators focus on it," he says, and creates better trustee awareness of the need to improve academic quality. "I deal with this every day in one way or another."

Other goals include attracting a freshman class with higher SAT scores and class ranks, increasing student retention and graduation rates, and perhaps most controversial, increasing the average spending per student from $18,000 to $23,000. Critics say this indicator and others measure "inputs" into the educational process and not the "outcomes" of a college education. What's more, it would seem to encourage an institution to spend more instead of looking for ways to operate more efficiently.

Trani is not naïve about the inputs-outcomes argument, but he recognizes that *U.S. News* is not likely to drop or alter such measures as graduation and retention rates. Nor does he believe all the measures are fair. "Transfer students do not count in the calculation [for graduation rate], but we take them and graduate them like crazy," he says.

Nonetheless, Trani says the rankings can help faculty focus on the issue of retention and give the board some good measures of progress. Trani keeps his eye on the prize, too. He carries a laminated index card that lists his 2000-05 presidential priorities. Topping the list is moving the undergraduate ranking from Tier 3 to Tier 2. He has a great incentive to accomplish this goal: For every year VCU is ranked in Tier 2, the board has promised him a $25,000 bonus.

In the years since the *WSJ* articles, *U.S. News* has worked hard to ensure the data it collects is reliable and comparable. It sponsors the Common Data Set (CDS) with the College Board and two publishers, Peterson's and Wintergreen/Orchard House. The goal of this collaboration is to improve the quality and accuracy of information provided to consumers and to reduce the reporting burden on colleges and universities by developing clear, standard data items and definitions. All of the higher education surveys conducted by the participating publishers incorporate items from the CDS, and those who report data for their institutions—commonly the director or vice president for institutional research—are urged to abide by the definitions and to use them when responding to the numerous surveys they receive.

Institutional researchers say members of their professional association take this seriously. *U.S. News* supplements CDS data with those it collects itself. Although colleges themselves still provide most of the data, the magazine supplements missing information from the American Association of University Professors, the National Collegiate Athletic Association, the Council for Aid to Education, the U.S. Department of Education, and Wintergreen/Orchard House.

Ninety-four percent of institutions that *U.S. News* solicited responded to the survey for the 2002 rankings. Much of the information for those that did not is available from the foregoing sources, though no school ranked among either the top 50 "National Universities—Doctoral" or the top 50 "Liberal Arts Colleges—Bachelor's" failed to return the survey. Likewise, no school in Tier 2 of the former group boycotted the survey, and among Tier 2 institutions in the latter category, only Reed College in Oregon, steadfast in its refusal for six years, ignored the questionnaire.

Though U.S. News *measures important indicators of institutional performance, the idea that disparate indicators can be combined in a ranking system rankles many people.*

2. In an effort to boost their selectivity ranking, some schools have dropped the SAT requirement for admission; other schools may be tempted to admit more students with high SATs. Some schools that have dropped the SAT requirement—and approximately 300 have done so—have found the average SAT score of applicants has risen, because those with high scores are most likely to report them to the institution. Other institutions that have dropped the requirement have found that applications have increased as well, perhaps because students who did poorly on the test (or did not take it) were emboldened to apply.

Having a larger applicant pool enables an institution to reduce its acceptance rate and to enroll higher percentages of students with high scores; this combination may contribute to a higher ranking. The dark side of this is that some institutions may be tempted to give greater weight to the applications of students with high SAT scores.

It is entirely possible that an increase in a school's average SAT score can affect its selectivity ranking in relation to peer institutions. But selectivity accounts for only 15 percent of the entire ranking, and SAT (or ACT) scores account for 40 percent of that 15 percent. Higher education officials have taken great pains to deny they have dropped SAT requirements in response to the rankings, preferring instead to question the validity or usefulness of the test itself.

3. In an effort to boost their yield and lower their acceptance rates, selective institutions have turned to early-admissions programs. It's a pretty simple equation: By accepting more students early decision, an institution guarantees a higher yield, thus boosting its selectivity

relative to its peers. In addition, enrolling more students through early decision can improve an institution's acceptance rate because it can accept a smaller proportion of those who apply through conventional timelines.

Again, selectivity is 15 percent of the total ranking; acceptance rate is 15 percent of that 15 percent, and yield is 10 percent of that 15 percent. This means yield accounts for only 1.5 percent of the total rankings, and so it would take a huge change in yield to make a very small difference in a school's total score. Here's an example: If a college went from yielding 38 percent to 46 percent of its applicants, that would improve its score by one-tenth of one percent—not enough to move its ranking. A 40 percentage-point change in yield (a huge jump) would change its selectivity score by a full point, but even that might not change its total ranking.

It certainly is true that the number of early-decision programs has increased and that more students are applying under such programs. Whether the *U.S. News* rankings have *caused* this is debatable, for institutions themselves surely are reaping other benefits from the programs—most prominently the ability to better plan and manage their spending on student financial aid and recruitment. Like the controversy over the SAT, the hubbub over early-decision programs incorporates elements that have little to do with the rankings, even as the rankings are cited as a primary motivation for dropping the test or adopting or strengthening such programs.

A similar debate is ongoing about merit versus need-based student aid. Cynics say the rankings are driving the move toward merit aid because schools want to attract higher scoring applicants.

4. The rankings are an arbitrary measure of quality and do not measure what is important in a college education. The most damning criticism of the magazine's rankings comes from a 1997 National Research Council report that *U.S. News* itself commissioned. "The weights used to combine the various measures lack any defensible empirical or theoretical basis," according to the report. This apparently arbitrary weighting scheme is what most rankles college and university officials. Although many people acknowledge that *U.S. News* measures important indicators of institutional quality or performance, they chafe at the idea of any formula that purports to measure overall institutional quality and that combines disparate indicators into a ranking system. This is the crux of the controversy.

5. The validity of some measures as proxies for the variables they purport to measure is suspect. For example, the alumni-giving rate criterion supposedly measures the satisfaction of an institution's graduates, but it also may measure the quality and vigor of a school's development office, and it surely gives private institutions a leg up on public ones. (No public university was ranked in the top 20 of the National Universities—Doctoral category in 2002; those that are ranked highest are large research institutions with foundations that have large endowments.) The data in this measure are for the percentage of undergraduate alumni who give, not graduate school alumni and not those who merely attended the institution; this may skew data for some institutions.

Cornell University is one institution that took a careful look at its alumni rolls and, consistent with the magazine's guidelines, purged its alumni lists of individuals who never graduated. Doing so helped it rise significantly within this subcategory. Attempts to manipulate the alumni-giving rate have given rise to "urban legends," such as the case of the institution that allegedly sent a dollar to all alumni and asked them to send it back so it could count a high proportion of alumni givers, or the case of the alumnus who gave a dollar in the name of all his fellow alums.

Also cited as a suspect measure of performance is the institution's graduation rate, an indicator the magazine considers very important. Different rates mean different things at different institutions. Virginia's Old Dominion University, for example, attracts many students from the military who stay only for a semester or two. Officials there say this hurts their graduation rate and thus their ranking. The same is true for institutions that attract large numbers of part-time or transfer students, neither of which counts in the rankings calculations.

Some critics point out that the entire exercise is merely a proxy for institutional wealth. They point to the highest ranked institutions and note the list closely correlates to the value of institutional endowments.

6. The rankings rely too heavily on input measures—institutional wealth, SAT scores, faculty salaries, and acceptance rates, for example—and not on how much or how well students learn. In addition to expressing frustration over whether any formula can accurately rank institutions, higher education officials regularly voice exasperation over the magazine's use of so-called "input" measures. This has led to several efforts to measure student-learning outcomes and the "value added" of a higher education. Most prominent of these efforts is the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE—pronounced "Nessie"), discussed on page 16. NSSE was launched explicitly in response to the *U.S. News* rankings, while other assessment programs have very different purposes.

Higher education officials complain about *U.S. News*'s use of input measures for other reasons. For example, the average-per-student-spending indicator, which accounts for 10 percent of the overall ranking, puts boards and administrators in a double bind. Most trustees want to restrain spending so the institution can be "run more like a business" and so they can keep tuition as low as possible. But if officials cut the rate of per-student spending, they risk lowering the institution's ranking. One vice president for finance of a top-50 university said his board was shocked when he told them that cutting costs might jeopardize the school's ranking and thus its ability to attract the best students.

Likewise, increasing spending on merit aid may cause an institution's SAT average to rise, but many schools may have difficulty sustaining large expenditures on institutional aid. What's more, spending more on aid means spending less in the classroom.

Complicating matters, changes in how *U.S. News* measures per-student spending has been responsible for much of the movement in the rankings, according to several accounts. In the past few years, the way *U.S. News* computed research expenditures was responsible for the controversial jump of Caltech from ninth to first and back down to sixth. *U.S. News* had to endure much unfavorable publicity that eroded its credibility in the wake of this internal controversy among its staff about how to weigh research expenditures.

7. U.S. News could measure what really matters in higher education but chooses not to. Last summer, this charge gained much attention when a former research director of the rankings made the allegation in a *Washington Monthly* article and toured the morning talk shows. Her coauthor was an editor of that magazine who had published several articles critical of the rankings dating to his time as a Stanford undergraduate. The gist of their argument was that comparable national data on student learning is available and that *U.S. News* is unwilling to collect it. They cited NSSE as a better measure of educational outcomes and charged that *U.S. News* refuses to incorporate readily available measures of student performance.

Morse of *U.S. News* points out that NSSE has fewer than 400 institutional participants (there are 1,400 in the magazine's rankings) and that the results are supposed to be confidential to the institutions that purchase the services of the survey's sponsor. He says the magazine is open to using information from students themselves, but he doubts whether 1,400 institutions will make such information available. For the upcoming 2003 rankings, *U.S. News* invited all schools that participated in NSSE to share some of their data and will publish the results.

Interestingly, 77 percent of the presidents in the AGB survey said they thought *U.S. News* could incorporate criteria that better measure educational outcomes or quality. Yet when asked to list specific measures, virtually all their suggestions were exceedingly difficult to measure. This may be an indicator of why no systematic effort to assess outcomes or quality exists across higher education. The top suggestions listed by responding chief executives were accomplishments of graduates, graduate employment rates, student satisfaction, percentage of postgraduate training, and better assessment of graduates. Some institutions measure such outcomes on their own, but this would be difficult to do effectively across peer institutions.

Among the best suggestions: *U.S. News* should ask who is teaching undergraduate courses, the

How the *U.S. News* Rankings Have Changed Over the Years

(This summary of changes was adapted from the work of Denise S. Gater, associate director of institutional research at the University of Florida and a research associate at TheCenter, a research enterprise at the university that measures the institutional performance of research universities. More details are available at *www.thecenter.ufl.edu/usnews.html*.)

1995 Weighting of the Financial Resources measure was decreased from 15 percent to 10 percent, and Graduation Rates increased from 10 percent to 15 percent. Weighting of faculty salaries included a cost-of-living deflator and reflected salaries of *all* faculty ranks, not just of full professors. The Alumni Satisfaction measure specified that alumni with graduate degrees should be excluded from the data reported for this measure.

1996 Because a school's ability to retain and graduate its students is an important measure of academic quality, the weight of the Retention measure increased from 15 percent to 25 percent. The Retention measure included two components: freshman retention (the ability to retain first-time freshmen) and six-year graduation rates. At the same time, the measure of Student Selectivity was reduced from 25 percent to 15 percent. In addition, the schools ranked 26 to 50 were listed in rank order. In previous years, these were listed alphabetically.

1997 The weighting of the Retention measure decreased from 25 percent to 20 percent (16 percent for graduation rates and 4 percent for freshman retention). The Value Added measure was added with a weighting of 5 percent of the total score (Value Added subsequently was changed to Graduation Rate Performance). A predicted graduation rate was estimated for each school based on test scores of its 1989 entering class and the school's educational expenditures, and this rate was then compared with the actual six-year graduation rate of the same class. Then, higher than expected and lower than expected graduation rates were calculated to determine Graduation Rate Performance.

1998 No significant changes in methodology, but changes in the way rankings were presented. Most important, the final score of each ranked school was rounded to the nearest whole number, which created more ties in the rankings. Also, a school's score in the reputational survey was shown on a scale from 4.0 (the highest) to 1.0 (the lowest). In the past, each school's reputation rank was displayed.

1999 Because of changes in reporting rules for private colleges and universities, *U.S. News* measured financial resources by the average spending per student on instruction, research, public service, academic support, student services, institutional support, and operations and maintenance. In prior years, the Financial Resources category was broken down into education expenditures and other expenditures. Education expenditures were calculated as the sum of per-student spending for instruction, student services, academic support, and institutional support. Other expenditures included spending on financial aid, research, operations and maintenance, and public service.

As a result of new financial-reporting standards issued by the Financial Accounting Standards Board, *U.S. News* revised its calculations for Financial Resources to make better comparisons between public and private colleges.

2000 Use of a procedure known as "standardization" brought calculations more in line with accepted statistical practices. *U.S. News* dropped a step it previously had used for national universities that tended to flatten out large disparities between schools in their performances on each indicator of quality. For example in the past, School A might have spent $200,000 per student, School B $100,000, and School C $50,000. If they were the leaders in spending, *U.S. News* would have recognized them as first, second, and third but would not have given them credit for the size of the disparities among them. This year, the weighting system took into account the size of these differences. In general, the changes boosted the rankings of a number of universities with strong science and engineering programs.

2001 Each school's research spending was adjusted according to the ratio of its undergraduate-to-graduate student population. Although large universities with sizable research programs and expensive medical and engineering schools often spend the most, a large portion of those expenditures benefits graduate students rather than undergraduates. Also, giving the highest scores to institutions that spend the most ignores the possibility that beyond a certain level, each incremental dollar spent no longer has an equal impact on educational quality. For schools reporting unusually high per-student spending, *U.S. News* applied a logarithmic adjuster to all spending values. Consequently, some institutions that are strong in the science—and thus moved up in the rankings last year—fell back in this year's rankings.

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size of classes for first-year students, and the percentage of classes taught by full-time professors. Some have criticized the "false precision" of the numerical rankings, suggesting it might be more palatable to group similarly ranked institutions by "bands."

The Rankings and Boards.

What do trustees think about the rankings? "When *U.S. News* publishes the rankings, that's when the board becomes interested. They're not so interested in the ranking itself," says Barnard College's Lewis Wyman. "They just want us to be on top of things. What they really want is reassurance that we're not being grossly misportrayed to the public."

Wyman says there's nothing in the rankings formula that he hasn't reported to his board in far more detail. Barnard has far more complex goals than moving up a few places in the rankings, he says. "Unless you define your own goals based on your own outcomes measures," says Wyman, "you'll never be able to distinguish yourself as an institution. Schools must frame themselves in wider measures," he says, "otherwise *U.S. News* becomes the de facto measure."

Critics say the rankings are a proxy for institutional wealth. The list correlates closely with the value of schools' endowments.

William and Mary's Timothy Sullivan says he shares with his board much of the data that *U.S. News* collects—such as admissions data on application numbers and yield rates—but only in context with other institutional performance data the school collects itself, such as survey results of alumni, students, and those who were accepted but who chose not to attend. His institution collects and analyzes data and compares them with those from peer institutions, says Sullivan, "but not because *U.S. News* might put us up in the rankings. Nothing in the *U.S. News* rankings tells us anything about the values of the institutions," he says.

Higher education may have entered a time when boards are becoming more sophisticated about the rankings. For example, David Davis-Van Atta, director of institutional research and analysis for Carleton College in Minnesota, has noted an evolution from a time he was asked to submit a lot of data to a board committee until today when, he says, trustees realize that resource measures cannot change that dramatically. Even if Carleton were able to rise, says Davis-Van Atta, the college still would have the same problems.

The Carleton board's change in attitude was partly a result of an analytical report Davis-Van Atta delivered in 2000 and partly due to his "endless harangues." He says: "People are aware there's no salvation in this. Institutions are not living or dying by the *U.S. News* rankings. The fortunes of institutions will rise and fall on far different things. This no longer registers on their radar screens." He believes we have settled into a "second generation" in which the rankings methodology and data will not change much, so the rankings won't either.

According to the AGB survey, about two-thirds of governing boards have discussed the *U.S. News* rankings, yet only 4 percent of presidents said they established a task force or committee to address the topic, and 20 percent said they ignore the rankings. Three-fourths of responding presidents said they believe their board thinks it must pay attention to the rankings whether it likes it or not. Presidents also said they thought their board believed the following about the rankings: that they are important to attract students (36 percent), distort efforts to improve higher education (38 percent), are useful for comparing the institution against its peers (34 percent), mislead students and their families (33 percent), and are worthwhile for students and their families (20 percent).

Michael S. McPherson, president of Macalester College in Minnesota, says graduation rates and alumni-giving rates have frustrated his board for some time. The fact that *U.S. News* publishes these data each year keeps this in front of trustees, he says, although campus officials want to improve the rates regardless of the rankings.

But what if institutional executives and the

board agree that rising in the rankings is an appropriate strategy? How would an institution go about improving its position? Clearly, many officials are buying the advice of consultants who prescribe marketing campaigns to boost the institution's image in the reputational survey. Others are taking cold, hard looks at the data the rankings require and using them not only to benchmark performance against their peers but also to target ways to rise in the rankings.

A 2000 memorandum to the board of a highly ranked "National Universities—Doctoral" institution details some strategies the university could use to achieve a single-digit ranking, if the board endorsed that goal. It says the university could advance if it (1) spent more money per student by investing significantly in its E&G budget, (2) doubled its annual fund-raising from private sources, (3) persuaded the legislature to appropriate more funds, and (4) increased its endowment.

U.S. News editors say an institution would have to improve its graduation rate, make student retention a high priority, boost faculty salaries, create smaller classes, lower the student-faculty ratio, and raise the average SAT scores and class rank of admitted students. If there were enough movement in some or all of these things, says Morse, a school could move up. But significant movement in these areas is difficult for institutions to accomplish, he says, and doing so would likely mean making considerable changes that could involve changing the institution's mission.

Schools move up or down from year to year based on their own efforts (or luck) in improving or lowering their performance in one category or another *and* on other institutions doing the same. Obviously, no institution can control what another does, so minor variations from year to year in any institution's ranking may seem inexplicable. Though the order of Tier 1 of the rankings does not change much from year to year (inclusion in the top 15 has varied by only one or two schools in the past dozen years), institutional officials who carefully monitor how the rankings work have been able to improve their school's ranking within a particular subcategory, and this, perhaps, has led to a higher overall ranking.

Some institutions have embraced the rankings criteria as a basis for institutional assessment or improvement—or even as part of a strategic plan (see the case study on page 6). The University of Kentucky, Clemson University, Texas A&M, Ohio State University, and the University of Arkansas, among others, have acknowledged they use some of the criteria, according to *U.S. News* editors.

Others mine the data and use it less formally. For example, Fordham University in New York learned by looking at its Tier 2 peers in "National Universities—Doctorate" that the proportion of its classes with more than 50 students was extremely low relative to its peers. "Why not ask some of our exceptional professors to teach a few larger classes," reasoned Peter Stace, Fordham's vice president for enrollment management, "and give more students access to the best we have to offer?" Through additional research, Stace also discovered the proportion of adjuncts teaching first-year students was high in relation to Fordham's peers, and officials changed that.

A dirty little secret: Some administrators acknowledge that they use the *U.S. News* data as

leverage with their board. They can show the need for additional funds for the endowment or the E&G budget and can urge stronger fund-raising efforts among trustees.

Emerging Methods of Assessment.

Various national surveys and assessment instruments have existed for a long time in higher education, but only recently have a few emerged that were spurred specifically by the *U.S. News* rankings. An excellent booklet published by the American Council on Education and the Association for Institutional Research details these surveys. *Measuring Quality: Choosing Among Surveys and Other Assessments of College Quality*, by Victor M.H. Borden with Jody L. Zak

Survey Results

Results of a Survey on the Effects of the *U.S. News* Rankings on the Policies and Practices of Colleges and Universities

Last summer, AGB sent an e-mail solicitation to 694 member presidents, seeking answers to questions about how they and their boards regard the *U.S. News* rankings. We received 241 usable responses (a response rate of 35 percent). Following are highlights of the survey results, reported in rounded percentages.

1. Do you know your institution's ranking?

Yes	78
No	16
Not Sure	6

2. Does this ranking accurately reflect the quality of your institution relative to its peers?

Yes	31
No	54
Not Sure	15

3. Has your institution ever attempted to improve its ranking?

Yes	51
No	45
Don't Know	4

4. Which indicator has your institution attempted to improve? (Check all that apply.)

Retention rate	88
Alumni-giving rate	84
Graduation rate	75
SAT/ACT scores of incoming freshmen	71
Faculty compensation	63
Percentage of faculty with a terminal degree	47
Class rank of incoming freshmen	46
Yield	45
Acceptance rate	44
Graduation rate performance	44
Percentage of full-time faculty	31
Student-faculty ratio	31
Educational expenditures per student	26
Class size	22

5. Please describe the efforts to improve the score on the indicator you checked.

These are efforts we would have made anyway	33
Have made general improvements	31
Greater selectivity of students	24
Increased faculty salaries	22
Created new and better programs	18
Improved funding/use of resources	18
Changed hiring or promotion procedures	14
Improved marketing/external affairs	8
Improved research capability	7
Established task force	4

6. How important are the *U.S. News* rankings to your institution?

Very important	10
Somewhat important	66
Not important	18
Not sure	7

7. How does your institution use the results? (Check all that apply.)

As internal benchmarks	50
Announce in press releases, on Web site, etc.	35
To gauge our success or progress relative to peers	33
We ignore the rankings	20
Key component of our marketing efforts	13

Owens, articulates the issues for campus officials pondering participation in various assessment surveys. The guide does not rate or recommend the surveys; it merely summarizes the characteristics of 27 national instruments and services and offers criteria for officials to use in determining their usefulness.

Three efforts either have been explicitly positioned or cited as possible alternatives to the *U.S. News* rankings. All three—NSSE, the College Results Index (CRI), and the so-called "National Report Card," a publication of the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education that graded state systems of higher education—have received recent press attention.

Conceived in 1998, NSSE is the most visible

8. Do you think most institutions provide accurate data to *U.S. News*?

Yes	28
No	32
Don't know	40

9. *U.S. News* asks presidents and senior administrators to gauge the academic reputation of peer institutions. The results account for 25 percent of an institution's score. Which of the following statements do you think are true? (Check all that apply.)

I have no idea about the quality of some institutions I am asked to rank	71
The rankings place too much emphasis on the reputational survey	70
Results of the reputation survey yield about an accurate a ranking as one might suspect.	21
I have downgraded an institution in our peer group.	7

10. What should *U.S. News* do to change the way it ranks institutions? (Check all that apply.)

Incorporate better criteria that better measure educational outcomes	77
Stop using criteria that measure how much money an institution spends	58
Change the weight of the academic reputation survey	42
Do away with the academic reputation survey	38

11. Do you believe *U.S. News* could add some measures of educational outputs, results, or value-added to its criteria?

Yes	76
No	8
Don't know	16

12. If Yes, what measures might *U.S. News* add?

Accomplishments of graduates	28
Student satisfaction	24
Percentage of postgraduate training	23
Graduate employment rates	22
Better assessment of graduates	21
Better measurement of quality	17
Graduate school entrance test scores	15
Alumni satisfaction	10

13. Has your board ever discussed the *U.S. News* rankings?

Yes	68
No	28
Don't know	4

14. How much time did it devote to the discussion?

Half an hour	71
An hour or more	21
More than two hours	3
Don't know	5

15. Is your board a primary force behind your institution's efforts to improve its rankings?

Yes	15
No	84
Don't know	1

16. In general, our board believes the *U.S. News* rankings... (Check all that apply.)

Are something we must pay attention to, like it or not	74
Distort efforts to improve higher education	38
Are important in our efforts to attract students	36
Are useful for colleges and universities in measuring themselves against their peers	34
Mislead students and their families	33
Are worthwhile for students and their families in choosing a college or university	20
Are not relevant/important	5

and would seem to be the most promising among the three. Several prominent educational researchers and scholars contributed to its development, and it now is supported by grants from the Pew Charitable Trusts and the Lumina Foundation for Education. A successful pilot in 1999 involved more than 75 selected colleges and universities. In its first three years, NSSE has attracted a total of 619 colleges and universities; the spring 2002 administration of the survey included 367 institutions.

Its premise, according to internal documents, is that "characteristics of student engagement can serve as a proxy for quality. At least as important, calling attention to the presence or absence of such practices can highlight specific things that individual colleges can do something about and provide information that external constituencies will readily understand. If technically sound and broadly representative, a national survey focused on such practices can begin to focus current quality debates around the right questions rather than falling back upon traditional reputational answers."

NSSE officials see the survey's potential as going well beyond "fixing the rankings." They would like to reframe both local and national conversations about collegiate quality by providing data that (1) institutions can use to improve undergraduate education; (2) external stakeholders, including accrediting bodies and state oversight agencies, can use to assess institutional effectiveness; and (3) the public and the news media can use as indicators of college quality.

NSSE is an attempt to "shift the nature of the public conversation about collegiate quality," according to George D. Kuh, who directs the survey from Indiana University. It focuses on how first-year students and seniors actually use the resources for learning that their school provides. Kuh believes this is a different and better way to think about collegiate quality than the rankings. NSSE provides comparable data across institutional type.

The questions in the survey are built around five benchmarks of effective educational practice:

1. the level of academic challenge—time spent preparing for class, amount of reading and writing, and institutional expectations for student performance;

2. active and collaborative learning—participating in class, working collaboratively with other students inside and outside of class, tutoring, and so forth;

3. student interaction with faculty—amount of time talking with faculty members and advisers outside of class, getting prompt feedback on academic performance, and working with a faculty member on a research project;

4. enriching educational experiences—talking with students of different racial or ethnic backgrounds or with varying political opinions, using electronic technology, and participating in internships, community service, study abroad, or a culminating senior experience; and

5. supportive campus environment—the extent to which students perceive the campus helps them succeed academically and socially, assists them in coping with nonacademic responsibilities, and promotes supportive relations between students, faculty, and administrators.

NSSE officials are wrestling with several issues: the reliability of student-generated data, the validity of the benchmarks, whether to release the names of participating institutions (it now does so only with a school's permission), and potential public misuse of the data and information, to name a few. (An article by Kuh in the May/June 2001 *Change* magazine, "Assessing What Really Matters to Student Learning: Inside the National Survey of Student Engagement," offers further detail.)

NSSE may represent the best opportunity for consumers to use "outcomes-based information" about colleges and universities. It never will be a true alternative to the *U.S. News* rankings because its officials do not intend to rank participants. Nonetheless, some schools that have fared well and have given permission for their results to be released have gained favorable publicity. Others—notably the highest ranking institutions in the *U.S. News* survey—do not want to be a part of NSSE because they fear they will not compare favorably with the small liberal arts colleges that have generated the best results.

As NSSE expands its base of participating institutions and garners greater attention, the public may come to see it as a valuable tool to be used in conjunction with the rankings. Evidence that schools are using the results in the same way they use a high ranking in *U.S. News* has

begun to surface. For example, New Jersey's Seton Hall University last year placed an ad in the *New York Times Magazine* that touts its favorable results, and Elon, Beloit, and Sweet Briar colleges have called attention to their commendable results as well.

The second promising institutional assessment effort is the College Results Index, which is directed by Robert L. Zemsky at the University of Pennsylvania branch of the National Center for Postsecondary Improvement. Its purpose is to characterize college results by surveying the graduates of the institutions in four clusters: personal interests, skills, work habits, and interest in continuing education. It asks for information from respondents about their levels of participation in arts and culture, religion, and community organizations. The goal is to give prospective applicants information to help them choose a school based on effectiveness rather than resources or reputation.

Like NSSE, CRI gives participating institutions a private analysis of the results along with national and peer-group information. Similarly, its goal is to give consumers another tool, based on the attributes a given institution promotes rather than on institutional prestige. Its officials do not intend to produce a ranking, but rather an alternative set of outcomes-based criteria for students to use in choosing a college and for institutions to use in benchmarking. CRI has a commercial arrangement with Peterson's, which states it is not in the business of producing rankings.

An adaptation of the CRI appears on Peterson's Web site. Prospective applicants can answer questions about their interests and activities, what they would like to learn, and so forth. Based on their answers, the site gives them a list of schools to which they should consider applying.

The third effort at assessing performance that received recent attention is *Measuring Up 2000, the State-By-State Report Card for Higher Education*, conducted by the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, under the direction of Patrick M. Callan. The National Report Card does not focus on institutional performance but compares *states* to one another in six categories: Preparation, Participation, Affordability, Completion, Benefits, and Learning.

It is less likely that the National Report Card will find use among students than among state policymakers. Further, it is noteworthy that the National Report Card gave all states a grade of "Incomplete" in the "Learning" category. It said: "There are currently no benchmarks that would allow meaningful state-by-state comparisons. The 'Incomplete' grade highlights a gap in our ability as a nation to say something meaningful about what students learn in college." This does not mean states are doing nothing in this regard, the report notes, only that they employ different methods in assessing students and thus cannot be compared.

Finally, a nascent effort is underway that hopes to measure the "value added" of liberal education and simultaneously serve as an incentive for continuous improvement. Directed by Richard H. Hersh and Roger Benjamin under the auspices of the RAND Corporation's Council for Aid to Education, it hopes to determine the degree to which a liberal arts education adds value to student performance and preparation for democratic citizenship. Its proposal defines "value added" as "the competencies, knowledge, and values gained by individual students as a consequence of liberal education curriculum and pedagogy at a particular college, university, or online provider."

Look long and hard at whether competing in the rankings game makes sense financially and otherwise.

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Hersh and Benjamin plan a two-year, $1.7 million feasibility study to determine the probability of success and to develop a consortium of funding partners. They envision the full study will take seven to ten years. "The result of this feasibility study," states their proposal, "will be

a developmental sequence of studies, each building upon the other, that will offer an assessment system useful for individual institutions and ultimately able to provide a database of sufficient utility for individual institutional improvement and public-policy deliberation.... The development of effective measures of the value added to student performance would create a new metric of the performance of departments and instructors that could be added to or replace research productivity as the only widespread criterion used now to evaluate performance."

Who Cares?

The rankings plainly interest consumers; otherwise, the magazine and guidebook would not sell as well as they do, and competitors would not continue to spring up. College-bound students and their parents spend millions of dollars on various guides, prep courses, and other products. But who is really using the *U.S. News* rankings, and do they find the information important in deciding where to attend college?

Patricia M. McDonough and three coauthors at the UCLA Graduate School of Education and Information Studies studied these questions and discovered the following:

- Sixty percent of college freshmen said the rankings were not at all important in their decision of where to attend college; 30 percent said somewhat important; and 10 percent said very important.
- The importance of rankings in college choice increases with family income.
- Almost eight of ten students in highly selective institutions said the rankings were somewhat or very important in their choices.
- Students choosing schools in the lower tiers of the rankings overwhelmingly said the rankings played no part in their decision making.
- Among students 25 or older, almost nine in ten found the rankings unimportant.

To be sure, most students need more basic information about how to choose a college than what appears in any college guidebook, notwithstanding the advice *U.S. News* publishes along these lines alongside the rankings. While it's not so difficult to believe that only 20 percent of presidents in the AGB survey said the rankings themselves were worthwhile for students and their families, a closer look at the *U.S. News* guidebook and Web site shows that there is valuable consumer information in the data. In choosing a college, who would not want to know statistics about class size? Who wouldn't want to see a list of the highest ranked institutions with the lowest tuition in various categories or in their region?

For trustees and others wondering how to assess the importance of their institution's ranking in *U.S. News* compared with all the other information they take to the boardroom table, all of the independent academic research, articles in the popular press, and advice from consultants may produce information overload. The *U.S. News* rankings are here to stay, and they may indeed be affecting how college-bound students and others perceive your institution. But in the grand scheme of things, it probably makes the most sense for boards to find out whether the rankings or any data in the various indicators are having—or conceivably could have—a determinative effect on the future of the institution.

Look long and hard at whether competing in the rankings game makes sense financially and otherwise. Understand who uses the rankings and whether your institution is competing for these students. And if gauging where your institution stands compared with its peers in matters of educational quality is important, consider creative ways to assess student learning and attitudes, and be aware of national efforts designed to judge how well students are learning and how well professors are educating them. ✧

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This Issue

A Complex Numbers Game

BY RICHARD T. INGRAM

Data sometimes hide as much as they reveal. This may be especially true in the case of the rankings of undergraduate institutions that *U.S. News & World Report* releases every September. These rankings, as everyone knows, receive plenty of publicity. But what effect do they have on the behavior of colleges and universities?

AGB Vice President for Publications Dan Levin recently took an in-depth look at the *U.S. News* undergraduate rankings. At the outset, he held several assumptions: (1) that many board members and senior administrators do not really understand how the rankings work, (2) that some institutions take the rankings far more seriously than others, (3) that officials of some schools attempt to "game" the process, and (4) that the rankings may be unduly influencing some institutions' policies and practices—perhaps to the detriment of their educational or administrative processes or their finances.

To test these assumptions, Dan spoke with presidents, provosts, and deans; senior administrators for enrollment management, institutional research, and public affairs; trustees, journalists, and higher education marketing consultants—and of course, the editors of *U.S. News* rankings themselves. (An interview with the editors appears in the July/August *Trusteeship*.)

Dan immersed himself in a wide range of popular articles, academic research papers, and commercial and academic Web sites devoted to the rankings, many of which readers will find useful (see page 15). He also conducted an e-mail survey of AGB-member chief executives. Among the 241 respondents, many offered their sentiments about the rankings and how they affected their institution's policies or practices.

Early in his research, Dan says, it became clear that although others already had plumbed the topic in great detail, no one had published anything that tied the broad array of material into a package that would be useful for chief executives and boards as a starting point of a discussion of the rankings. That's the aim of this issue of *Priorities*.

But there's another purpose as well: The public and political leaders are clamoring for ways to assess what students have learned once they complete college. In the absence thus far of any systematic effort on the part of academe to assess institutional performance, trustees need to know about the various efforts of those who are working on some creative responses to a real need. As a consequence, readers will find a summary of a few prominent institutional performance-assessment efforts that are being conducted nationally, some of which are emerging as a direct result of the *U.S. News* undergraduate rankings.

Dan Levin deserves praise for his pursuit of these complex and timely issues. For the first time, in one place, the logic of the *U.S. News* rankings is laid bare—as are the consequences, both perverse and healthy, that they engender. We'd like to hear from you after reading Dan's analysis, and I hope you'll save this issue of *Priorities* for future reference.

—Tom Ingram is president of AGB

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